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SUBJECT: Darfur - Shelter and Settlements Assessment

Summary and Comment

11. The conflict in Darfur has significantly altered the region's settlement system. A majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has been settled for up to three years; however, small-scale returns are ongoing and new incidents of displacement continue. These factors necessitate that the humanitarian community move away from the principal approach to shelter assistance that has been implemented to date. From May 6 to 18, 2006, the USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) Shelter and Settlements Advisor traveled to North and South Darfur to assess shelter and settlement conditions and monitor USAID/OFDA-funded shelter projects. The assessment revealed that a misapplication or lack of application of basic shelter assessment methods and beneficiary selection criteria continues to plague the sector. Recommendations for improving programs include viewing plastic sheeting as an input to more durable shelter solutions and complementing this with other inputs, such as improved fuel-efficient stoves, as part of an upgraded shelter package. End summary and comment.

Assessment Activities

12. USAID/OFDA supports shelter projects implemented by two non-governmental organization (NGO) partners, CHF International and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), in the three Darfur States. The projects total approximately USD 2.8 million and provide shelter support to an estimated 20,000 beneficiaries living in three distinct environments: camps, host communities, and rural areas. Although modest in scope, these projects are, strictly speaking, the only two specific shelter projects in Darfur. Other NGO partners provide a form of shelter assistance through the provision of plastic sheeting and other inputs as part of emergency relief item packages; however, these activities should not be considered focused shelter projects because the sheeting is often used for other purposes, such as fencing, drying mats, and covering food.

13. From May 6 to 18, 2006, the USAID/OFDA Shelter and Settlements Advisor traveled to North and South Darfur to assess shelter and settlement conditions and monitor USAID/OFDA-funded shelter projects. During this period, the Shelter and Settlements Advisor met with USAID/Sudan and USAID/Darfur Field Office (DFO) staff, implementing partners and other relief organizations, UN agencies, and the Sudanese Humanitarian Affairs Commission. The Shelter and

Settlements Advisor and USAID/DFO staff visited several project sites, including Otash, Dereig, Kalma, and Bilel IDP camps in South Darfur and Abu Shouk, Al Salaam, and Zam Zam IDP camps in North Darfur. The Shelter and Settlements Advisor also traveled to Kabkabiya, a host community approximately 140 kilometers west of El Fasher to assess shelter and settlements conditions in the city, as well as accessible villages in outlying rural areas. IDPs in all locations visited expressed views on shelter conditions, prospects for returns, and related issues. Due to security concerns, the Shelter and Settlements Advisor did not assess shelter conditions in West Darfur, but did meet with CRS in Khartoum to discuss project activities in and near El Geneina.

Settlement System Changes and Challenges

14. The conflict in Darfur has significantly altered the region's settlement system. Hundreds of rural settlements have been destroyed, and large numbers of people have moved closer to larger towns and cities. The three Darfur state capitals have experienced enormous population growth, with El Fasher increasing by 300 percent in just three years.

15. Challenges to the provision of shelter assistance in Darfur include the harsh environment, long supply lines, and government-imposed obstacles. There is also a limited sense of a shelter sector in Darfur. No weekly shelter sector coordination meetings occur, no lead agency on shelter exists, and only two NGOs are recognized as having significant shelter sector capacity (CRS in West Darfur and CHF in South and North Darfur).

16. A further complication is that basic assessment methods and beneficiary selection criteria are often misapplied or not applied;

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for example, needs have not always been recognized and the most vulnerable have not always been the beneficiaries of assistance. This practice has been widespread, particularly regarding the use of plastic sheeting. Shelter is often perceived as the provision of plastic sheeting, which is subsumed as part of a relief commodity package. However, because shelter requirements are not part of commodity needs assessments, no guarantee exists that sheeting will be used for the intended purpose of constructing some form of shelter.

17. Given the onset of the rainy season, a major concern is distribution of plastic sheeting. Based on field assessments, however, additional mass-volume distributions of sheeting are not required. Many IDPs are already using one sheet and have one, two, or even three sheets in storage, implying that the humanitarian community may have over-resourced plastic sheeting. In addition, an impressive and dynamic black market for plastic sheeting has emerged, another sign that sheeting is readily available and that sheeting is not always being incorporated into shelter projects.

Shelter Inputs

18. Because the Darfur settlement system has been greatly altered by conflict and the majority of IDPs has been settled in camps or host communities for up to three years, their needs are different from newly displaced or recently returned populations. Despite this, commodity distributions continue to feature one-size-fits-all packages that have become increasingly irrelevant to the needs of settled IDP populations. To date, plastic sheeting has been included as an item in a non-food item package, subject to annual replenishment. Viewing sheeting as an input to a durable shelter solution, however, would improve existing shelter conditions and serve as the basis of a shelter package that might permit a more effective transition to permanent shelter in the event that returns are possible. Interviews with IDPs revealed that many who had begun to construct mud-brick houses did so solely to improve miserable living conditions and not because they intended to stay in their current locations.

¶9. IDP camps in Darfur are densely populated and made almost entirely of highly flammable building materials such as straw. Any measure intended to enclose open cooking fires, like fuel-efficient stove use, should be promoted as a fire prevention measure. Fuel-efficient stoves are also an input that can improve public health, mitigate environmental impacts associated with fuel wood collection, generate livelihoods, and provide economic benefits to consumers. In addition, the introduction of metal fuel-efficient stove production would involve men as a new beneficiary group and result in more durable stoves that are capable of being moved in the event of returns.

Shelter Package

¶10. Designing a durable, low-cost package of shelter assistance is possible and recommended. This upgraded shelter package could be applied rapidly to enhance current living conditions considerably and contribute to the transition back to villages of origin in the event that returns occur. The package would include local materials like poles and millet straw to expand and cover living space, an improved fuel-efficient stove, a treated mosquito net, and plastic sheeting when necessary to be placed under the straw for a more durable and effective roof. This package would greatly enhance the quality of shelter conditions in the extremely harsh environment of Darfur and should be provided consistent with sound assessment practices. More appropriate use of plastic sheeting will greatly improve shelter conditions, as covering the sheeting with straw will reduce internal air temperatures and ultraviolet degradation, thereby extending the effective life of the plastic. The package would also provide an alternative to the pervasive practice of improving shelter conditions through construction of mud-brick houses in and out of camp settings, which consume vast quantities of scarce and costly water resources.

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